Baba Yaga Burns Paris to the Ground by Wren Awry

To Begin …

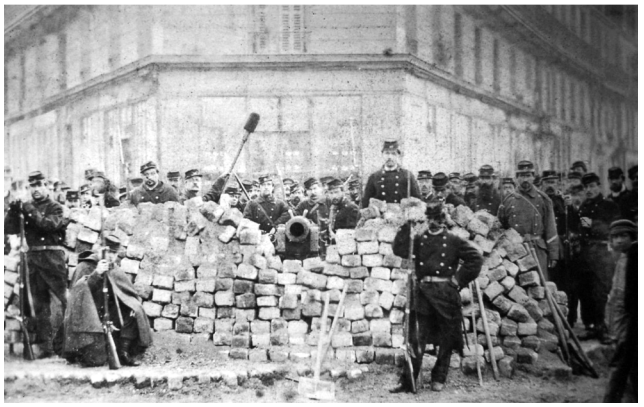
"I'm interested in myths," Angela Carter wrote, "Just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree."

Carter was among the first to imitate fairy tales in her fiction (a little tome called The Bloody Chamber, anyone?), and her work highlighted the patriarchy and violence of the classic stories.While the myths Carter re-tooled came from story books, history is also rife with myths that made the world — myths that are ripe for turning inside out. It is these historical myths, and their connections to fairy tales, that fascinate me. I'm especially intrigued by one of them: that of the pétroleuses, fire-wielding women who supposedly set Paris ablaze during the Commune of 1871.

Furies glide through the rich quarters [...] and fling their little vials of petrol, their devil's matches, their burning rags.

The myth of the pétroleuses was certainly invented to make people unfree (in this case, by the Communardes' conservative opponents and yellow journalists)[1]. But I like pétroleuses because their fire and ferocity hint at interesting predecessors. Born of the collective fear of a power hungry elite, pétroleuses follow in a long line of mythologized fire-wielding devil-women — women like Baba Yaga, the youngest sister in the Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird," and the women burned during the great witch hunts of early Modern Europe.

Paris, 1871



The Paris Commune of 1871 looms large in the imaginations of anarchists, communists, and leftists. In actuality, it was brief and ill-fated. It lasted for just seven weeks, from May 18 to March 28, and ended with the slaughter of thirty-thousand working-class Parisians at the hands of the French government. Still, it offered a bold — if imperfect — vision of what a collective society could be.

It began like this: The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 threw France into turmoil. Emperor Napoleon III was captured on

[1] A yellow journalist is a journalist more interested in selling newspapers, crafting eye-catching headlines and writing hyperbolic stories than writing about the news.

the battlefield and a new republican government formed in his absence. The war ended with the Prussians laying siege to Paris for four months, which brought food shortages, constant bombardment, and growing disparities between the rich and poor. In the end, France ceded land, money and honor to Prussia. Working-class Parisians, angered by this surrender, started stashing cannons that Prussian soldiers had left in the city in the hills of the Montmartre neighborhood.

The government acted swiftly and stupidly to quell dissent. They lifted the wartime moratorium on the payment of debts and back rents, and debtors' goods could, once again, be pawned by the state. The government also executed working-class leaders and banned the distribution of radical newspapers. But it was when they tried to seize the cannons stored in the hills of Montmartre that they lost Paris. The half-hearted troops the government sent to confiscate the cannons fraternized with the rebellious Parisians. Order was lost. The government withdrew to Versailles and, in the void, the left-leaning Commune was born.

The Communards saw themselves as builders of a secular, classless society. They elected a governing council whose members were paid a modest wage and could be forced to step down if their actions got out of hand. They sought free and secular education for all children and replaced boss-run enterprises with worker-managed shops and factories. On the streets, and in homes and barrooms, the Communards dreamed big: they wanted all of France to operate as a federation of autonomous communes.

Their dreams were not to be realized. On May 21, the Versailles army slipped through the gates of Paris. As the army fought its way through the barricades, their shells started to ignite buildings—the first to go up in flames was the Ministry of Finance. The Communards started setting their own fires to prevent the army's advance and to be able to escape under clouds of smoke. The semaine sanglante, or "bloody week," began.

TheLouvre Library, the Palais Royal, and the Tuilieries Palace were among the buildings that went up in flames that week. Smoke made it hard to breathe and sparks and ash rained down onto the streets. At night, the city had a burnished glow, and flames could be seen from twenty miles away. One child reported seeing thousands of small shadows scurrying out of a burning ministry building—they were rats.

The Versailles army re-conquered the city, the smoke cleared, and the fire damage proved less extensive than originally thought. The greatest loss was the tens of thousands of Communards who were slaughtered, and the thousands more who were subsequently imprisoned or exiled to New Caledonia. But the scale of the flames didn't really matter, because the fires were the perfect propaganda device. Conservatives politicians and newspapers seized on the fires as a chance to sway public opinion, and it worked. This was their primary tactic: blame all of the flies set during the semaine sanglante on working-class women, and then make those women monsters. Call them *pétroleuses* — essentially, petroleum-wielding lady incendiaries.

The Pétroleuses

Historians contend that the pétroleuses and their incendiary acts were largely fabricated— almost all the fires that raged during the semaine sanglante were set by male barricade fighters and Versailles soldiers. Still, the journalists of 1871 were remarkably detailed — and persuasive — in their reporting. On June 3, a description was published in the popular newsmagazine Le Monde illustré. This bit referred to them as "furies" who "glide through the rich quarters, profiting from the darkness or the

desertion of the streets the civil war has caused; and fling their little vials of petrol, their devil's matches, their burning rags [into cellar windows]." Other papers, both French and international, published similar assertions.

The 1860s have been called the "great age of the political caricature[2]," and, while journalists may have invented the pétroleuses, it was caricaturists who turned them into the defining image of the Commune. While the illustrations differ according to each artist's and publisher's predilections, they draw on similar elements: flame, gasoline-soaked rag, unruly woman. There is the pétroleuse stalking forward with a flaming torch, her back hunched, her face contorted into a menacing grimace. Then there's the trio of co-conspirators setting an arson as a bourgeois family escapes out of a burning home in the background. These pétroleuses look like Macbeth's witches, and I imagine them laying chants and incantations over the flames.

A pétroleuse drawn by the artist Nevel is gentler and more cautious. She is an old woman with a covered head — perhaps a grandmother. She holds a bottle of kerosene, probably the same stuff that started the small fire burning in the corner of the drawing. A little boy stands next to her, holding a burning twig. While she keeps a nervous look out, he is transfixed by the flames. Another image — by a certain Gustave Doré — shows no kerosene, and no fire. The pétroleuse's breasts hang low and her nipples are prominent. She carries knives and a musket. She wears a rough-hewn cap and, above it, a halo hovers.

Charles Perrault's Fairy Tales

Doré was also in the business of fairy tale illustration. In 1864, he published Perrault's Fairy Tales, a folio of thirty-six engravings and nine stories by Charles Perrault, France's best known fairy-tale writer. The artwork it contains is considered a cornerstone of fairy-tale illustration, and the folio caused a renewed interest in Perrault's stories. Published just seven years before the Commune, it seems plausible that the news writers and political cartoonists who invented the pétroleuses had read Perrault's Fairy Tales, and were familiar with his feminine archetypes.

Charles Perrault was born in 1628 to a well-off Parisian family, and he spent time in aristocratic and literary circles. Perrault wrote his fairy tales at a time when there was a keen interest in the genre and when authors—many of them women—were produced elaborate,dark fairytales,or contes de fées. Perrault's tales have outlived those of his contemporaries because they are simpler, linear, and wrapped up with happy endings (making them easy to tell and easy to reproduce). The stories often originated as oral folktales, but he sanitized them and imbued them with aristocratic mores.

His male heroes are witty and spry, his heroines are either passive and graceful or doomed. Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood doesn't feast on her grandmother and perform a strip tease to outwit the wolf like she does in earlier, folkloric versions. Instead, she gets gobbled up for her boldness. Bluebeard's bride fares better, but only because she is lucky.

If you watch horror films, you'll recognize "Bluebeard" — its plot structure is a foundation of the genre. It goes like this: a young woman of uncertain means is married off to a rich, blue bearded gentleman. He goes away on business, leaving her a key to all

[2] By Robert Tombs in the book "The Paris Commune 1871"

the rooms in his castle. She is told that she may open any door but one, lest she wants to incite her husband's wrath. Of course, she opens the door. Behind it are the corpses of his previous wives, and the floor is thick with blood. Shocked, she drops the key into the pool of blood, staining it. When Bluebeard returns and finds the key stained, he prepares to murder her. Her brothers arrive in the nick of time to save her and destroy her would-be killer.

While Doré's pétroleuse is messy and defiant, his Bluebeard's wife looks precious and naive. Doré depicts her taking the key from her husband — she fingers it gently, as if seduced by it. This engraving suggests that Bluebeard's wife is weak-willed and implicit in her own fate, and that the women before her have died because they, too, could not follow man's directions.

The Great Witch Hunts

Perrault wrote his fairy tales a decade after the culmination of the French witch trials, and though France executed fewer women than other European countries, I can't help but see an echo of these times in Bluebeard's chamber of disobeying wives. Witchcraft went on the books as a capital offense in France in the mid-1500s36 and remained there until 1687. In the interim, thousands of women were executed and ideas about female nature changed: women came to be seen as weak, prone to evil, and in need of male supervision.

In Caliban & the Witch, historian Silvia Federici draws links between the inception of the witch hunts, an intensified period of religious and social upheaval, and epidemics like the Black Death. As the prosecution and execution of witches raged on, European countries were colonizing the New World, establishing the slave trade, and privatizing land and resources that had once been held in common. Federici contests that the European witch trials were part of a transition from feudalism to capitalism, and that quelling peasant uprisings and silencing women's voices were key parts of this endeavor.

Federici sees the pétroleuses as heirs to the propaganda originally created during the witch hunts. "Like the witch," she writes, "the pétroleuse was depicted as an older woman with a wild, savage look and uncombed hair. In her hands was the container for the liquid she used to perpetrate her crimes." This assertion is reflected in contemporary descriptions of pétroleuses. E.B. Washburne, the American minister to France, wrote that the pétroleuses were paid ten francs per ten houses burned, and that they would find, kidnap, and arm children with "incendiary liquid." The crimes of recruiting children and setting fire to private homes echoed allegations levied against women tried as witches.

Depictions of pétroleuses, like those of alleged witches, were rooted in sinister ideas about "female nature." Communards who fought on the barricades waged battle on the same terrain as men, and though they might have fought hard, they were never seen as equals. The pétroleuses disregarded the male-defined fields of battle and rules of engagement; instead, they snuck through the night with their fire and kerosene. They used trickery, cunning, and secrecy —negative qualities ascribed to women by European society — as tools of revolt.

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Federici doesn't directly reference fairy tales, but the tropes of the genre weave their way through her text. She writes that "the world had to be disenchanted in order to be dominated" and that "the witch came to be associated with a lecherous old woman, hostile to new life, who fed upon infant flesh or used children's bodies to make her magical potions — a stereotype later popularized by children's books."In

fact,the crimes witches were charged with sound remarkably like the behavior of the bad women in fairy tales. *Cannibalism, deception, promiscuity, nudity, and night flights!*, the law men cried, as they dragged thousands of women to their deaths by fire or hanging.

Fitcher's Bird

This imagery is strong in the stories of the Brothers Grimm, where bad women go up in smoke and get gotten by the devil.Some scholars estimate that the Grimms' German homeland executed around 26,000 people on charges of witchcraft, so it's plausible that this history would find its way in to folklore. Or maybe it's just the nature of German wonder tale: the stories are less burlesque and more explicitly gruesome than their French counterparts. Limbs are lost, children are cooked into stew, and Cinderella's sisters have their eyes plucked out by birds.

Here and there, there's a story that turns the "bad, punished woman" trope on its head. My favorite is a distant, queered relative of the "Bluebeard" story called "Fitcher's Bird." The protagonist of "Fitcher's Bird," a youngest sister, is not docile or virtuous, and she does not marry a prince. Rather, she is a trickster, a scrappy survivor who uses her wits to save herself and her sisters from a murderous sorcerer.

Here's the plot, in brief: the sorcerer, Fitz Fitcher, kidnaps young women to romance and then kill them. The protagonist's two older sisters — first one, then the other — have recently fallen prey to his machinations. Both have been taken to his home in the forest, treated lavishly, and then, after some time, told by Fitz Fitcher that he must depart for a while. Both have been given an egg that they are instructed to carry with them everywhere. Both are warned not to open a certain door. The sisters follow his instruction about the eggs, but break the taboo of the forbidden room. They discover a bloody basin full of dismembered corpses and, in shock, drop their eggs. The eggs are stained with blood, which the sisters can't rub off no matter how hard they try. Fitcher kills them for their transgressions.

Fitz Fitcher then kidnaps the youngest sister, and the plot repeats itself, except … the youngest sister puts the egg in a safe place, opens the door, and, when she discovers the hacked-up corpses of her sisters, sets to work putting their limbs back together. The older sisters come back to life, and the youngest sister hides them in the house.

Fitcher returns, sees the unblemished egg, and is tricked into believing that his bride-to-be is obedient. The balance of power shifts, and now the sorcerer is compelled to follow the youngest sister's every command. She requests that he deliver a gold dowry to her family before she marries him and he carries the heavy load willingly, unaware that it is really her sisters. While he's gone, she invites all of his cronies to the wedding party. She places a dressed up skull in the window of his home to stand in for herself, and then rolls herself in honey and feathers. She has become Fitcher's Bird and, in this disguise, she makes her escape. She meets Fitcher's friends, and later Fitcher himself, along the road home. None recognize her. Fitcher and his friends reach the house and, when they are safely inside, her kinsmen burn the house down.

It is only in this act of burning that the story feels a little wrong. The heroine outwits the sorcerer, brings her sisters back to life, tricks Fitcher's entire posse to their deaths and makes her escape. She uses deceitfulness and trickery as survival strategies for herself and her sisters. Yet it is the brothers who destroy Fitz Fitcher and his friends? I've tweaked the ending in my imagination. All three sisters are there, participating in the burning. They are, in a way, pétroleuses.

(They are also, maybe, witches. University of Winnipeg professor Catherine Tosenberger offers a bit of lexical evidence that could link "Fitcher's Bird" to the witch hunts. Although the German word the Grimms use for Fitcher — hexenmeister — usually means "wizard" or "sorcerer," it can also refer to someone who "detects witches and turns them over for punishment." Following this line of logic, the story offers an inverted view of the witch trials, where the witches set fire to the witch burners.)

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House on Chicken Feet

"Vasilissa the Beautiful" is also a story about a young girl held in the woods against her will, at the mercy of a powerful being with a bad reputation. Her step-sisters and step-mother have sent Vasilissa to the house of the fearsome witch Baba Yaga for a lantern, a ploy they hope will get her eaten or just plain killed. But Baba Yaga — while certainly exacting and sharp tongued — is not as a cruel as her step-family says. Vasilissa completes the tasks that Baba Yaga sets before her with the help of a magical wooden doll given to her years prior by her deceased mother. After a while, Baba Yaga is impressed with Vasilissa's work and asks about it. Disgusted that Vasilissa attributes her success to her birth mother's blessings, the witch throws her out. But she also gives Vasilissa the asked-for lantern, in the form of a human skull set upon a stick. Vasilissa arrives home, and her step-mother and step-sisters are overjoyed to see her—they haven't been able to keep a match lit since she left, and are living in the dark. But–

The eyes of the skull suddenly began to glimmer and to glow like red coals, and wherever the three turned or ran the eyes followed them, growing larger and brighter till they flamed like two furnaces, and hotter and hotter till the merchant's wife and her two wicked daughters took fire and were burned to ashes. Only Vasilissa the Beautiful was not touched.

The witch Baba Yaga has not only given Vasilissa light, she has also given her protection and freedom.

"Vasilissa the Beautiful" is the best known of the Baba Yaga stories scattered across Eastern Europe. Baba Yaga's wide range is attributed to her deep, old roots: in her earliest forms, Baba Yaga might have been the Slavic deity Mokosh, or "moist mother earth," who eats the bones of the dead. Christianity came later to Russia than to the rest of Europe, but even when it did, Mokosh lived on in Saint Paraskeva, Patron of Women. Still, Baba Yaga and her goddess-like powers were seen as a threat to Christianity — thus her re-casting as a demonic witch in later tales.

By the 1850s, when the folklorists Afanasyev and Khudiakov were publishing Russian skazkas, works deemed anti-clerical were harshly censored and the authorities considered pagan folktales unfit for common consumption.The tales persisted because spoken stories were irrepressible and because of a growing intellectual interest in the genre, but I wonder what pagan remnants got lost for good in the translation from oral storytelling to print.

Baba Yaga's connections with Mokosh might be responsible for one of her primary attributes: her fierce defense of the forest in which she lives. In Russian stories, she is tougher on Russians than anyone else, and she lusts particularly for Russian blood. It's suggested that she's testing her fellow Russians, ensuring that they respect and deserve to live on Russian soil. The industrial revolution and three-thousand odd miles stand between Baba Yaga and the pétroleuses; they belong to different worlds. Still, I see similarities between Baba Yaga's defense of Russia's forests and the incendiaries' defense of their sprawling city.

Baba Yaga has an array of magical objects: her house on chicken legs, her mortar and pestle ship, her one leg made of bone. All of these give her power and bring the stories that she stars into life on the page. But what interests me most is Baba Yaga's associations with fire. Her house is sometimes located across a river of flame and is ringed by lanterns made of human skulls. Her stove is her greatest threat, a place

where characters believe they will be incinerated, although it as often resurrects life. Like Fitz Fitcher, Baba Yaga has the power to take life, but like the youngest sister, she can also put it back together again. Baba Yaga can even resurrect herself: in fact, she sometimes dies at the end of a story, only to turn up in yet another tale.

If Baba Yaga builds incendiary devices to give to little girls, and Baba Yaga is good, doesn't that mean the social order is at least a little bad?

Baba Yaga is neither fairy godmother nor evil sorceress. She is something more ambiguous. She teaches those who come to her door essential survival skills. She teaches them when to be honest or to lie, when to obey or demand, to steal or stay. Baba Yaga doles out punishments, but she also doles out tough love. Why, then, the bad reputation? Perhaps she is called evil to remind the young that she is opposed to the Christian order of things, that she cares not for polite society. That even if she helps the hero, she is a wild woman and not to be trusted. If Baba Yaga builds incendiary devices to give to little girls, and Baba Yaga is good, doesn't that mean the social order is at least a little bad?

Pétroleuse as Fairy Tale

I imagine a fairy tale about the pétroleuses. Then, I try my hand at writing one. I utilize some of the fairy tale genre's stylistic tropes: flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic. I scrape the story down to its bones, tear puzzling gaps into its fabric, tweak and tweak until it flows like a rickety old cart. This is what I get:

There was once a city of stone where some people ate their soup with silver spoons and others sopped it up with crusts of bread. Though the people of the silver spoons ruled the city for many years, for a spell the people with the crusts of bread possessed it. They set to work re-making the city like they might re-make a chair or shoe: re assembling the parts with hard -work so all had enough, instead of a few having all. But the people of the silver spoons snuck back into the city with guns and bayonets. The streets became the color of roses.

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Among the bread crust people, there were certain women, fierce and wise. They carried matches and kerosene, and little children ran at their skirts. They snuck through the night time city, leaving flames and smoke behind them wherever they went. Many of these women did not wake up.

To Conclude

The pétroleuses were created to draw support away from the Commune and justify the slaughter and prosecution of thousands of Communards. Fairy tales, too, uphold the unjust order of the world: they are often about royalty and riches; proper feminine values; and the sanctity of marriage. They have been used, in recent centuries, to teach children the dangers of transgression, of not obeying the rules society has set forth. Be too curious, Perrault suggests, and you, too, might end up as a madman's bloodied corpse or a wolf's second dinner.

I don't know if the men who dreamed up the pétroleuses read Perrault or the Grimms or how much they knew about the thousands of women executed for witchcraft in previous centuries, but those stories certainly informed their world. It makes sense that they modeled the pétroleuses after millions of executed witches, and in contrast to meek fairy-tale heroines. It makes sense, too, that they created an icon reminiscent of the fairy-tale protagonists who deviate from the social order. Like the youngest sister in "Fitcher's Bird," the pétroleuses use trickery and cunning as survival tactics. Like Baba Yaga, they defend their turf fiercely and understand that everything comes with a great price. All of these mythologized women have accoutrements of fire, incendiary metaphors for un-making and re-making their worlds.

The conservative press during the Paris Commune crafted pétroleuses as villains, but I see them as folkloric heroes, willing to go to great measures to defend their city and their dreams. They stand at a crossroads between the witch-hunts of early Modern Europe, the literary traditions of European fairy tales, and histories of resistance to capitalism and the State. It is their place at this crossroads that makes the pétroleuses an inspiring entry point into finding, telling, and writing fairy tales that undermine the hierarchical structures of the world.

"I am all for putting old wine in new bottles," Angela Carter also wrote, referring to re-writing and re-interpreting older tales, "Especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode."

Pop, pop, pop!

A Note About the Author

Wren Awry writes about fairy tales, food, literature, ecology, history and film from an anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist perspective. They're a contributor to and founding editor of Tiny Donkey, a journal of short-form, fairy-tale nonfiction affiliated with Fairy Tale Review. Their essays & poems have been published in Rust + Moth, Essay Daily, Anarcho-Geek Review, Loom Art Zine, and Tiny Donkey.

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